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# Street Art in Kathmandu as a Tool for Activism and Social Change

Madison Minchin

*SIT Study Abroad*

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# Street Art in Kathmandu as a Tool for Activism and Social Change

Madison Minchin

Academic Advisor: Daniel Putnam

Project Advisor: Kiran Maharjan

University of Redlands, Johnston Center for Integrative Studies

Kathmandu/Patan, Nepal

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**Abstract:**

In recent years street art has become a popular platform for activism and social commentary in Kathmandu. Both local Nepalis and visiting foreign artists have transformed the streets of the city into their new canvas for art and change-making. The effectiveness of this unique intersection of art and activism has narrowly been examined through an academic lens. This research intends to understand the specific intentions of street artists and their art in Kathmandu. The effectiveness of this street art as a platform for social change is measured in this research through qualitative interviews and observational techniques. Analysis of the dynamics between the artists' intentions and the potential reach of their art is used to gauge the impact of street art as a tool for activism. Collaboration between artists and their ideas, audiences, and mediums seems to be the way in which art can successfully act as a tool for change. The lack of this collaboration amongst activist based street art in Kathmandu (i.e. coming from an individual artist and the personal perspective of that artist) results in the art being less relatable for a viewer and thus less effective in terms of activism.

## **Introduction:**

Graffiti and street art have become synonymous with city life across the world and in recent years has become a very respected form of art with a large following. The street art scene in Kathmandu is in its early stages; as young artists become inspired by well known visiting artists who paint murals throughout the city in unique styles (Brownell 2012). This creates a fascinating dynamic of originality, intent, traditional Nepali art, modern art styles, and content to which many social questions can be asked. One important aspect of the street art subculture in Nepal is the concept of visiting and foreign artists, this is how the unique form of art started in Kathmandu and how it continues to evolve through the sharing of art and ideas on social media. Street art in Kathmandu includes many mediums of art in addition to murals and wall paintings, including performance, photography, music, and film screening. And dozens of organizations have sprung up in Kathmandu focussing on the intersection of these mediums of art and collaborating with local communities through workshops and residencies on their respective mediums.

Street art globally seems to have become somewhat synonymous with social commentary because of its public nature and a large number of viewers. Because of this, it can be used as an effective tool for activism and change making and can have a large impact on the community where it is placed.

There are many relevant social topics of interest in Nepal right now such as contrasting ideas of development, western influences on traditional Nepali

spaces, and themes of caste, gender, race, and religion (Liechty 2003). Street art in Kathmandu often interacts with all of these dynamics through its content and audience, making it an exciting way to look at these topics through the very specific cultural lens of this subculture. This research seeks to address the following: 1. What are the intentions of street artists in Kathmandu with their work? 2. How do the artists approach the interpretation of their work by viewers? 3. What is the reach and potential impact of their work on the community where the art is made or placed and the artist's targeted audience? 4. Who participates in the process of making the art? 5. How does individuality or collaboration in the creation of the art affect intent, content, and interpretation?

### **Literature Review:**

For the purpose of this study, street art is defined broadly—any medium of public art, exhibited on the street or in a public space, free and open to all. Murals and paintings on the walls of the street are of course the main associations to the term street art but performance, photography, music, and film can and is exhibited on the streets of Kathmandu year-round creating a unique scene of collaborative and thought-provoking art for the people of Kathmandu. The first basis of understanding for this research is how street art is used in these public spaces. The second is how street art is culturally viewed and understood. The most simple understanding of street art is as a subculture of the art community dedicated to its unique form of artistic expression. In terms of intention and content, street art

often stems from an artist's devotion to social activism as a reaction to social injustice or political differences (DeNotto 2014, Maric, Serafini 2015). Street art has been studied for these intentions as well as its ability to call for revolution, raise awareness, foster hope, reclaim space, and "beautify the urban environment" (DeNotto 2014 208). In academic discussions of street art, it has been understood as a tool of change-making in that it "rejects established standards", "encourages experimentation", and at the core is focused on social change (DeNotto 2014 208, Serafini 2015). In addition to the art's content, the placement of the piece directly affects its potential for impact in terms of audience and amount of viewers within that community (Iddings, McCafferty, and Silva 2011). The context of the art, artist, and viewer is crucial to understanding the complex relationship between intent and interpretation between the three;

meaning is not...something which is isolable in just one part of the system. Rather, it is a result of the relationship between the agent-observer and the overall system of relations on all levels.  
(Thibault 2004 234).

Because of these common themes in content and intent, street art can be used as a tool for development and social change-making. The question however is how effective is this tool? What is the real influence and efficacy of art as a tool of activism in the context of developing Nepal? Answers to these questions differ vastly by interpretation, understanding, and context—making them impossible to answer in a general sense. For many artists this uncertainty is acceptable and even welcomed, however "the artist who hopes to bring about social, economic or political change through art must address questions about its impact" (Duncombe



2016 117). The “the affect and effect” of art is at the core of its efficacy as a tool for activism, development, and social change (118). “Art is an expression that generates affect” but the “goal of activism is to generate an effect”—the difference of which Duncombe’s article addresses—a complex relationship which makes understanding the combination of the two complicated; “it is difficult to determine with any precision when social change has happened and what its cause was” within the context of a work of art (118-119). “Activism moves the material world, while art moves a person’s heart, body, and soul” (118). It is for this reason that when paired together, although complicated in terms of different intentions by the practitioner, it can be an incredibly powerful force for change.

Answering these questions becomes an act of understanding intent, context, and interpretation. Paired with an understanding of the contrast between activist’s clear motives and direction and artist’s desire to remain abstract with their direction, aim, and intent. Some of these answers have been attempted in a study in Brazil; interviewing community members about their understandings and interpretations of the street art in their city as well as the artists “concerning how they perceive the social and political role of graffiti in the community” (Iddings, McCafferty, and Silva 2011 5). In this research, they study graffiti and street art as a

literacy practice (in a broad sense), as it entails different ways of socially organizing communicative events involving written language and semiotic signs that can provide opportunities for access to social and cultural understanding. (Iddings, McCafferty, and Silva 2011 6)

This sense of street art as a practice of literacy amongst an artist and their viewers is an important aspect in the effect that street art can have past its aesthetic properties. This research's findings showed that the artists "expressed a deliberate desire to influence the social and political consciousness of community members" in the hopes this would inspire social action within the community (Iddings, McCafferty, and Silva 2011 5). All participants in their study recognized graffiti as being "an important resource in the community, helping members engage in critical perspectives" of important and relevant issues (Iddings, McCafferty, and Silva 2011 5). This study offers helpful insight into the contrast between the 'affect and effect' of the combination of art and activism in the context of similar research.

Another important area of examination for this research lies in urban subcultures and the way in which they are culturally and academically understood. Spaces formed by subcultures offer unique opportunities for social commentary and discussion with few boundaries. Subcultures are rooted in resistance, youth, class, identity, and authenticity (Daskalaki and Mould 2012, Williams 2007). This understanding of subcultures is key in examining the culture of street art. While these subcultures have been studied in some contexts in the West,

at large it has remained a marginal subfield within cultural sociology—indicative of the way in which youth trends have been excluded or disvalued in formal discourses. (Pincince 2016 8)

Most research previously conducted on the topic of graffiti and street art come from the largely common perspective of the West of graffiti and street art being vandalism and something that must be controlled. This speaks to the history of associations between graffiti, gangs, and violence (Gunnel 2010 14). This however does not apply when studying graffiti in an entirely different context of which people do not have such associations. In Nepal, graffiti has long been used as a form of propaganda for political parties and public associations with graffiti were often paired with politics rather than art until the last 10 or so years when local Nepali artists began covering up that political propaganda with new styles properly referred to as street art rather than graffiti (Basnet 2016).

In Nepal specifically, caste and western/foreign influence are other important platforms of knowledge in researching this aspect of Kathmandu's activist culture. Foreign and Western influence in Nepal have been studied in depth by Liechty (2010), who offers important insight into how foreign, youth, and counterculture influence affect Nepal. Graffiti and street art have long been used in Nepal to represent political parties. But street art, in the sense in which this project seeks to research (with social change-based and more artistic intentions), really did not begin until a handful of local artists began responding to this political graffiti (Brownell 2012). Thus inspiring the the graffiti scene in Nepal to be content-driven with the goal of making a statement. In Nepal specifically, the creation of street art rather than graffiti is relatively new and was not practiced until 2008 when local Nepali artists became inspired by Space

Invader, a famous French graffiti artist who came to Kathmandu at the time and painted 20 pieces across the city (Brownell 2012). After this, the street art scene in Nepal exploded and local Nepalis as well as visiting street artists from around the world began to see the city as their new, modern canvas for statement making, progressive artwork.

### **Research Methodology:**

Qualitative data through semi-structured and unstructured interviews and conversations, as well as observational techniques at events were used to gain the information in this research. A list of basic topics to be discussed was assembled before each meeting and interview, tailored to that person or organization and the work and/or art they do. Themes in discussion that spanned each interview included the following; source of inspiration, intent, content of art, community participation, collaboration, art vs. activism, and intent vs. interpretation.

Essentially the goal of the interviews was to understand the work that the artist or organization did, artistically and socially, what the intention of their work was prior to its start, how or if they included their audience or the community in the pursuance of those goals, and the way in which they achieved their goals through whatever means they chose. Analysis of the reach or effectiveness of this work were made by the researcher from the basis of an understanding of art and activism in a theoretical and practical sense.

The five organizations interviewed were chosen because of their focus on art and social change/involvement and for their diversity in operations and mediums of art. Events held by these organizations were attended to understand the audience they were attracting and speaking to and the reach of their work on an event-to-event basis. A few individual artists who address social change and social issues in their art, unaffiliated with these organizations were interviewed as well to be able to compare and contrast individual vs. collaborative art activism and get a large scope of the street art scene in Kathmandu. Because of the small size and collaborative nature of the art scene in Kathmandu, interviewees were relied upon for the contact information of future interview subjects as they all work together in the close-knit art community of Kathmandu. Data was triangulated through asking the same questions of multiple subjects as well as online resources for these organizations and artists such as their website or Facebook page.

### **Research Findings:**

#### **A History of Activist and Street Art in Kathmandu:**

The street art and activist art scenes in Kathmandu are very young and constantly evolving and redefining themselves. Until the early 2000's, art in Nepal was very traditional and arts education was focused for the most part on imitation of skill rather than creativity or original ideas. After the turn of the century, artists began pushing these boundaries and norms and new forms, styles,

and mediums of art began to be experimented with (Ranjit 2016). It was at this time that activist art got a hold and not until around 2010 that street art did. This rise of street art can be partially attributed to multiple foreign street artists who around this time painted throughout Kathmandu. These foreign artists inspired local Nepali artists through their visits as well as through the internet and social media which is used as a main platform for the sharing of art and ideas around the world in the street art community. This platform offers a unique way to inspire each other with new ideas, styles, techniques, content, materials, etc. And it continues to be crucial to the scene today as tool to stay up to date within the international street art community and to share work with a wider audience to discuss the art, intent, and content with anyone who is interested—increasing the reach of the art significantly and also giving it a second, more permanent life than the often quick one on the wall itself (Maharjan 2016).

What is unique and special to the interviewed artists about street art in general is that it is accessible to everyone. It is its own open gallery for all; one does not have to pay or be part of an art community to see it or understand it. This makes street art quite unique and unlike most other forms of art. It also allows an artist to promote themselves, quite effectively to thousands of people, completely on their own (Aryal, Tamang 2016).

Because of the young status of street art in Nepal, materials prove incredibly difficult to find, spray paint especially. For this reason, Nepali street artists have to be especially resourceful and creative with the resources that are

available. Nepali street artists also tend to mix traditional motifs and symbols into their art as a way to make it more relatable and appealing to local passers-by (Aryal, Bajracharya, Samayoa 2016). For this reason the street of Kathmandu is incredibly unique in its style and technique.

While street art is often viewed only as murals on the walls of the streets, street art can be a lot more than that. The art scene in Nepal supports this as over time it has evolved to include many other mediums of art such as photography, videography (film screening), performance, music, graffiti (tagging, wheat pasting, painting, stenciling), etc. All of which can be found all over the streets of Kathmandu in exhibitions, screenings, planned and spontaneous performances, etc. throughout the year. This seems to have only been the case for the last 10-20 years though (Maharjan, Ranjit 2016).

The alternative art scene's turn in the early 2000's in Nepal can be partially attributed to Ashmina Ranjit, who at this time started encouraging other artists to follow her lead in pushing the boundaries of Nepali art which until that time was very traditional and focused on skill and imitation rather than content-based or thought provoking works.

*Ashmina Ranjit:*

Ashmina has been pushing the boundaries of art in the sense that Nepali culture understood it since she was young as her approach to making art has always come from an activist standpoint even though it was not until later that she had the words to express this. Ashmina saw more possibilities in art than what she

was exposed to in Nepali art school though and in the early 2000's decided she wanted to start a movement to change these norms. This, she describes as the "turning point" for art history in Nepal. The change was not immediate, especially from the wider community and audience of Nepali art at this time but this was the time when artists in Nepal began to push at these long-lasting boundaries of what art could be defined as (Ranjit 2016).

Although Ashmina, having studied art at various universities throughout the world has had numerous opportunities to live and work elsewhere, she is ultimately committed to continue building this community in Nepal, a place that until recently has not been viewed internationally as a hub for anything but traditional Asian art. While Ashmina does not do street art in terms of painting on walls, she has done numerous performances in public spaces dedicated to a variety of social justice issues. She continues her work in various organizations she has started and is a part of and through what she calls "relational art"—the constant practice of art—and in that, activism—in an every-day, abstract sense (Ranjit 2016).

In 2004 during the peak of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Ashmina did a performance about the instability and atrocities occurring across the country. She convinced every radio station in Kathmandu (52) to play the audio of villages crying after learning of the death of 12 of their village people during the hour and a half period she chose to do the performance. She gathered her 90 of her students at the Kathmandu University School of Arts as well as various other artists and



friends to act out a variety of performances between the clocktower and Singha Durbar of Kathmandu. The performance was supported by all of the political parties, who agreed to halt protests during the performance and the Nepali Police. The incredibly powerful performance was viewed by over 12,000 people in person as well as likely thousands more through the radio. The performance is still talked about today as people approach Ashmina about how much the performance meant to them. The circumstances and context of this performance certainly impacted many as this was an incredibly powerful way to approach and speak of a major crisis facing the country—and one of the first of its time. Over the years, Ashmina has continued to make art of various mediums like this about important social issues in Nepal and she is a leader of the activist art movement in Kathmandu which she calls “artist” (Ranjit 2016).

*Lasanaa:*

In 2007 Ashmina started the “artist” group Lasagna, dedicated to looking at, practicing, and discussing art in a critical way from new perspectives. Their main goal is “social reform through art” (Lasanaa, Wordpress). They achieve this through a variety of mediums ranging from workshops, performances, hosting artists for residencies, film screenings, exhibitions, discussions, as well as with their space, Nexus which acts as a gathering space for all of these projects as well as the way in which they are self-sustaining—through a cafe and rent-able rooms (Ranjit 2016). The group is focused on collaboration in all of their practices.

As a result of Ashmina and other artists encouraging the Kathmandu art community to embrace new ideas of what art could mean, the street art scene really exploded around 2010 when a few foreign street artists visited Kathmandu and multiple street artist groups and organizations were formed by recent graduates of the Kathmandu University School of Arts in the hopes of expanding the art scene of their home that they had studied for the last four years.

Tagging has long been used in Nepal for political campaigns. Whether it be stencil and spray paint or wheat-pasted signs, for decades political propaganda has been strewn across the walls of Kathmandu's streets. This propaganda was not focussed on aesthetics but rather quickly getting a message out to as many people as possible. Artists however saw potential in this concept and began going in new directions with it—with more aesthetic intentions. The groups ArtLab and Artudio started with their street art in the streets of Kathmandu covering up this political graffiti with bright murals and tags.

*Artudio:*

Artudio was established in 2010 as a center and platform for visual art. They have four main principles from which they function; space, visual education, initiatives, and services. They have a studio/exhibition space in Swayambhu which plays a crucial role in their efforts to bring creativity, collaboration, experimentation, education, etc. to the community. The main way they achieve this is through camps, workshops, meet-ups, discussions, classes,

residencies, exhibitions, street art projects, community art projects, etc. Co-founder of Artudio, Kailash was inspired more by Kathmandu itself than the influence of international street artists when he began painting on the streets; “I have often thought of how Kathmandu’s walls represent us. They hold a distinct character of their own. I wanted to work on them” (Shrestha 2012 74). And Artudio’s intentions seem more based on the social change aspect of their work than the aesthetic.

Artudio’s first mural was on the outside wall of Hotel Himalaya in Patan. This was a common space for political propaganda and they wanted to reclaim it. It was painted in 2011 at the time when there was a lot of political instability and protests within the country. They wanted to participate in the movement but did not feel that protesting was the most productive way so they decided to use their artistic skill to do something a little different—something not ever done before. In starting this first project, Kailash

felt that artists also ought to have their voices heard, but being artists, we ought to strive for constructive modes of expression. We decided to utilize the social space and change the area. At a time when there was a lot of negativity going on, we decided to come up with positive ideas. (Shrestha 2012 74)

Artudio’s group enlisted many artists, friends, art students, and community members to help with the piece. They decided on the message for the piece being “we make the nation”. They had passers-by help with the creation of the mural and the imagery used within it. The response, Kailesh says was extremely positive

—effective in their goals to bring hope and a positive outlook on an incredibly difficult time for their country (Shrestha 2016).

Artudio has continued their work in street art with their most recent ‘I’m you’ stencil project, using other Nepalis who are working on social change to inspire others to do the same and through an ongoing project partnered with UNICEF, going to various destinations across Nepal, educating school children about the importance of washing hands and then collaborating with the students to create a mural in their town. Artudio also took a group of foreign and local artists to a rural areas of Nepal to collaborate with the locals to make pieces of art based off of their experience and the village made only out of materials that could be found there. Artudio’s projects are vast and far reaching as they make a habit of traveling all over Nepal and collaborating with locals to teach not only about art but also about the social justice based content of their art projects (Shrestha 2016). Kailash believes that “painting on walls” alone “cannot change the nation”, but if they can “make people aware” and “make people change their opinions, then that goes a long way towards a better future” (Shrestha 2012 75).

#### ArtLab:

ArtLab was started in 2011 by a group of recent Kathmandu University School of Art graduates. While Artudio and Lasanaa’s intentions from the beginning were focussed on social action through their art practices, ArtLab started with slightly different motives. They had no intention other than to take back the streets from the divisive politics and their propaganda which covered the

walls and make people smile and enjoy some art—they wanted to “make the walls more beautiful” (Bajracharya 2016). The founding artists were inspired by the street artists they were seeing through the internet and social media and wanted to bring that scene and subculture to Nepal. In the beginning, they were not trying to say anything or make social or political statements with their art but rather wanted to cover up this political propaganda which only served to remind people of their country’s seemingly never-ending political battles. They were painting over this propaganda with smile-inducing, colorful work. Eventually however as they became “more mature”, and their art gained attention, they realized that this platform could do a lot more than just make people smile (Bajracharya 2016). It was the perfect way to discuss, educate, and act on important issues facing their country and get these messages out to a large amount of people at any point in time.

ArtLab’s *Prasad* project is their most recent endeavor, spanning 2 years and various phases throughout that time. Prasad in Nepali means ‘offering’ which is what they hope to do through this project—offer a solution to a major problem in Nepal—migration—through inspiring the young people of their nation. It began with painting the portraits of local Nepali “heroes” in the effort to show young people that there are options within Nepal and it is not necessary to travel to other countries to be successful or make money (Maharjan 2016). Many different people have been portrayed in these murals and paintings; musicians, poets, authors, mountain climbers, comedians and social workers, all of whom

have “manifested positive action for the Nepalese society” (Maharjan 2016). This broad spectrum of subjects reaches Nepali people from every background and caste in the hopes of them seeing themselves in these heroes and being “reminded of the good in” Nepal’s society and to realize everyone has “the ability to impact it” (Maharjan 2016). This topic of migration is a common and important one in Nepal and to continue with the work of their *Prasad* project, ArtLab has expanded the project to bring exhibitions and workshops to various cities in Nepal. These exhibitions are a collaboration between artists, mediums, and ideas—incorporating various artists in a collaborative and participatory discussion of migration through artistic means such as poetry, dance, performance, photography, film, street art, etc. in the hopes of reaching as many people as possible. Through *Prasad*, ArtLab also hosted a series of workshops in various cities, accompanying their exhibitions and murals, teaching street art and graffiti techniques to anyone interested.

*Photo Circle and the Photo Kathmandu Festival:*

Photo Circle was founded in 2007 as a platform for photography in Nepal. They work to “bring together photographers and other visual storytellers to nurture unique voices that document and engage with social change in Nepal” (Photo Circle). They are the organizers of Nepal’s only international photography festival which had its first year in 2015 just after the earthquake and its second in October of 2016. The festival is held throughout the streets of Patan, and in Patan’s Durbar Square making it completely visible and interact-able from

anyone who walks by—a unique aspect, rare to most photography exhibitions around the world. The “essence” of the festival, according to Raji, a member of the planning team for Photo Kathmandu, is about community and art accessibility for everyone and “not being told what to look for or what it means—just experience the art as it is in the space” (Manjari 2016).

The festival seems to draw visitors of all backgrounds;

there were mothers bringing their toddlers home from school who stopped for a quarter of an hour; there were teenagers returning from school who meandered off; there were shopkeepers who took time off from waiting for customers. (Tuladhar 2016)

The festival also draws international visitors and artists to participate and observe.

This year, only one of the artists out of the 12 exhibited was Nepali. But this is attributed to the young life of photography as a profession in Nepal.

The focus of the work for this year was “resilience”—suitable considering the current status of the country after last year’s earthquake (Manjari 2016). Each exhibition spoke about—in one way or another—“how people live their lives”, “connection and disconnection from life”, “memory making”, the “interception of different cultures”, and migration (Manjari 2016). One exhibition from this year, titled ‘Broken Rules’, spoke to the power of women in Nepal through quirky portraits of Nepali women who have been the first to break a particular set of rules. Other exhibitions from this year included ‘Close Distance’ which featured portraiture of middle-class women and their domestic servants in Bangladesh, ‘The Other Side of Annapurna’ featuring photographs of the Marpha Village in the Mustang District of Nepal (on the Annapurna Circuit) during the off season of

trekking, and ‘Dalit: A Quest for Dignity’, highlighting the discrimination of the ‘untouchables’ of Nepal and the difficulties that come along with that identification. Not every exhibition was focused on Nepal but all could be related to relevant issues currently facing the country and spoke to social concerns that can be heard around the world. During the course of the almost month-long festival, workshops, artist talks, slideshows, discussions, and portfolio reviews were held as well, open to anyone interested. The large scale of this festival seems to make a large impact on Patan and its residents as they get very excited about getting involved and being a part of such a high-quality festival. For this reason, the impact of the festival seems to be quite large (Manjari 2016).

*Sattya Media Arts Collective:*

Sattya Media Arts Collective is a “resource center and hub” for all kinds of artists; film makers, photographers, painters, activists, etc. in Nepal, “spreading messages using this art as a tool” (Nemkuo 2016). They hope to use these various mediums to bring change and awareness to the people of Nepal. They achieve this through making art accessible to everyone through workshops, public art projects, exhibitions, and screenings.

In 2012 Sattya began the year-long project of Kolor Kathmandu, a street art endeavor to paint 75 murals throughout Kathmandu, each mural telling the story of one of the 75 districts of Nepal. The goal of this project was to bring people together through art and through the stories of their country as well as to get away from the constant political rhetoric amongst people and along the walls



of the city. They brought in international artists as well as local Nepali artists of all backgrounds to participate in the project. The participation of the international artists in this project was crucial for its success as street art proved quite intimidating to the Nepali artists of whom most had never done a mural of such scale in a public space like this before—an intimidating task. The visiting artists helped to break this fear amongst the local artists. Sazeena, a administrative employee of Sattya, describes Kolor Kathmandu as a “revolution” for these Nepali artists for this reason and because street art until this time was culturally not recognized as ‘true art’ and art in general was not seen culturally as a respectable profession (Nemkuo 2016). But for the the people of Kathmandu to see street art on such a massive scale validated street art in Nepal—leading to its increasing acceptance over the years.

Another project run by Sattya is Bato ko Cinema. In this program they make and screen documentaries in various cities in and outside Kathmandu Valley in public spaces for the communities. Documentaries featured come from Nepal and other countries. They use these films to “spark ideas, create discussion, and inspire people” (Bato ko Cinema). Their documentaries span a range of different social issues relevant to those currently affecting Nepal. Their screenings are free and targeted towards anyone walking by who might want to watch and participate. As an effort for retention of the messages of their films, after each screening, a Sattya artist paints a mural on the same topic as the film in or near the space the film was screened—a slightly more permanent reminder for the attendees of the

film to keep thinking about and discussing these issues. Sattya also makes an effort to have discussions with attendees after the screenings as they want to keep these conversations going in any way possible. So far they have screened over 500 films in over 40 locations to over 4,000 people (Bato ko Cinema). In addition to their Bato ko Cinema program, in collaboration with ArtLab's Prasad project, Sattya also screened films in many of the locations of the murals around Kathmandu done by ArtLab artists on the same topics in the similar effort for retention of the viewers.

For all of these organizations, workshops with the community on their specific areas of expertise in art are a main priority. Whether it be the techniques of documentary making and videography or an abstract discussion and lecture series exploring the relationship of artistic practice to life experience, all of these artists and organizations see the value in involving their community in the work they are doing which expands their impact and reach significantly. Organizations like ArtLab and Sattya seem to, for the most part, focus on skill and technique in their workshops while Lasanaa and Photo Circle tend to engage more in conceptual discussion and training about content and intent. Artudio seems to focus on both aspects in their workshops. Some workshops are free and welcome to all and others have a fee or are geared towards a certain community, type of artist, or skill level. Many of these groups make a point to travel outside of Kathmandu with these workshops as art like this outside the valley is severely lacking. In some of the places these groups travel to, the members of these

communities have never interacted with art like this or seen art as a possibility for their futures. These experiences give them a positive interaction with art on many different levels. The power of these workshops is vast and very important to the growing scene of alternative art in Nepal. Without these workshops, the community involvement and participation in public art in Nepal would be significantly less and thus the reach and importance behind the art would be as well.

#### Intention of Street Artists:

Intention in art varies significantly amongst artists. Some artists interviewed intend very clear messages while others want people to come to their own conclusions or create their own meaning entirely. Some were really focussed on bringing the international street art subculture that they saw online through social media to Kathmandu while others wanted to stray away from this and create Kathmandu's own scene without the international or Western influence. Some just want to make a technically successful work of art while others could care less about the aesthetics and see community participation and interaction in the production of the art as their main priority. This is an important aspect of art and its conceptual and abstract nature. This is complicated however when art is used as a tool to educate, empower, mobilize, etc. When these are the goals of art, the intention should be more clear and direct so that it can effectively lead to those outcomes. Not all artists find this to be true though as priorities in art differ vastly.

For this reason, gauging success of art based off of intention is nearly impossible. Instead one must look at the artist's honest intentions with their work prior to its completion and the ways in which they go about achieving those goals (Ranjit 2016).

Art is often a very personal undertaking and it usually comes from a very personal place (Maharjan 2016). Some artists interviewed stated that to be a proper advocate or activist for something through their art, they had to have experienced that in some way or be able to empathize with it on a personal level (Aryal, Maharjan 2016). This is another way in which understanding intention is complicated—every artist has their own way of understanding their art and their own philosophy behind what they create (Maharjan 2016). This however sometimes makes art hard to relate to for the viewer. For this reason, art as a tool for larger goals of educating gets complicated.

The intentions amongst the organizations interviewed also seemed to differ significantly. While some had very clear and drawn out goals, others remained vague and seemed to change their intentions depending on the artists participating and intent of the project. Amogh of ArtLab stated that “it is not always about giving a clear message”, instead sometimes the artists want to be vague in their art to increase the creativity and interpretation of the viewer and allow them to come to their own conclusions (Paraajuli 2016).

“Visual literacy” was a term brought up by several interviewees in terms of intent and goals for the viewers and audience of their art and referred to it as

something that is important yet lacking amongst Nepalis of all ages in terms of their ability to make sense of art and visuals (Maharjan, Manjari 2016). Other themes of intention amongst the artists and organizations interviewed included creating a connection between the community and the art and artist, creativity and diversity in viewer's interpretation, the targeted audience being the youth of Nepal, community taking ownership of the art after its creation, creating a public and open gallery, making beauty accessible to everyone, reaching as large an audience as possible, and working with local motifs and imagery.

One important note about intent amongst the interviewed artists is that very few of them identified themselves as art activists even though the art work they are making seems to be quite activist in its intent and content. This speaks more to perceptions of what being an activist means though than it does about the work that these artists are doing (Ranjit 2016). There is no one definition of what art activism is but for this research it has been defined as art made with the intent to change or educate about current social or political issues and topics.

#### Interpretation, Understanding, and Reach of Street Art in Kathmandu:

“There is always a dividing gap with street art” stated Kiran of ArtLab while speaking of the intention of artists vs. the interpretation by their audiences (Maharjan 2016). But this gap does not seem to scare or concern artists, in fact they seem to welcome it. Every artist interviewed spoke to the importance they place on their audience using their own personal imagination and creativity while

interpreting or understanding their work. This was more important to every artist than the audience interpreting the work the way they originally intended. Some artists saw this discrepancy between intent and understating not as a failure on their part but rather an indication of where the viewer is and what they need in a personal and psychological sense (Maharjan, Paraajuli, Tamang 2016). Other artists however saw this as more of a lack of honesty, on the artists part, of their original intentions and in fact as a failing of the artist to get their message across or evoke a specific reaction or feeling within the viewer (Ranjit 2016). Almost all individual artists interviewed did not make it a priority to look into their impact on their audience after the fact. However almost all organizations interviewed did make this a priority through viewer discussion and participation in their projects—an interesting distinction showing the difference between intention, interpretation, and reach of art coming from an individual and personal place versus from a collaborative environment.

Most street art in Kathmandu “is loaded with symbols and imagery” which suggest an interpretation for the audience (Maharjan 2016). Nepali street artists seem to have found how to make their art as relatable as possible for their audience through these symbols and imagery; “if you do a manipulation of a God or Goddess it might get noticed, otherwise it is just a beautiful wall” (Bajracharya 2016). In this way, “the people who see the artwork in the streets, they see themselves reflected” (Samayoa 2016). So it seems that when the art is put in the context of the viewer it can speak to that viewer in the most effective possible

way. The art though is not always in the viewers context however as a large majority of the art done by the interviewed artists and groups seemed to be in English—an interesting choice when the goal is social change in Nepali society. This seems to limit the possible reach of that art if not everyone can understand the words in it—one of the biggest hints possible towards the art’s meaning.

Topics of politics, for which the definition is quite broad, seem to be more touchy and problematic for artists in terms of reception by the Kathmandu community and viewers (Aryal, Maharjan, Ranjit, Sunuwr 2016). During Ashmina’s second solo show focussed entirely on women, the main response she got from a range of viewers was to not combine art and politics, that art “should not have anything to do with politics” (Ranjit 2016). This was a common theme throughout most interviews—viewers are harsh towards artists who bring politics and art together—even more so if that combination includes religion as well such as in a work from Aditya Aryal which quite controversially brought the three topics together.

Extremely provocative pieces like this also seem to warrant a negative response regardless of the cause that they are supporting. This is clear especially in Aditya’s piece, ‘rape me’ in support of protests of the assault of a woman by government officials which depicted the Kumari Goddess’ face with a naked woman’s body and the words ‘rape me’ written above. In this piece Aditya was attempting to call out the hypocritical views of women in Nepali society—worshiping the Kumari goddess but assaulting others. The piece had no

explanation to go along with it and it seems that people interpreted it in the opposite way than Aditya intended. Although his intentions seemed to be more on shock-value and rebellion than on the cause of women's rights itself. The wide misinterpretation of Aditya's piece though goes to show the thin line an artist has to balance in Nepal with activist street art. It suggests the importance of an explanation or some sort of collaboration in medium to go along with provocative art when it is being shown in a community and context likely to be offended by the imagery and unwilling to look at its legitimacy or meaning within the artist's context or intent. It also speaks towards the importance of an artist being able to identify with the content of their work on a personal level—Aditya's 'rape me' piece did not seem to do that. In fact many female artists were offended by his piece as well as they saw it as more of an invitation for violence than an attempt to speak against it as a result of him not being able to identifying with the issue in the first place, being a man (Ranjit 2016).

One aspect of street art which makes it unique as both a form of art and also as a tool for activism is that it is very clearly aimed towards young people—older folks do not understand it as much and seem to be less interested in trying to understand it (Maharjan, Tamang, Sunuwr 2017). This is for multiple reasons; 1. It is a very aesthetic-based scene and in general is viewed as a subculture exclusively for young people (Maharjan 2016). 2. Social media plays a huge role in the spread of the street art scene and views of it—and those on social media are for the most part younger people (Bajracharya 2016). 3. As education has changed



in Nepal recently to include more critical thinking and interpretation, this has helped young people to look at and understand art differently (Bajracharya, Ranjit 2016). 4. With this change in approach to and understanding of education, alternative scenes and subcultures within art and other cultural interactions have grown more popular.

#### Community Participation, Ownership, and Collaboration:

In the street art scene in Kathmandu there is a massive collaboration between artists, organizations, mediums, social movements, etc. This collaboration and diversity in art is what makes the street art scene in Kathmandu so exciting and fresh—constantly experimenting with new mixings of ideas and mediums as well as including community members in the projects.

There are a multitude of ways that the interviewed artists and organizations collaborate with community members in the process of making their work; asking the community for permission to paint in their space, collaborating with the community on the content of the piece based on the community's needs and struggles, improvement and upkeep of the space, preliminary research on the community prior to the creation of the piece, etc. This community “give and take” collaboration seems especially significant and important in the context of Nepal and increases the reach of the art significantly (Maharjan 2016). It also allows for the community to take ownership of the art after the artist is finished—another important aspect in the art making process for many of the artists (Maharjan,

Manjari, Nemkuo, 2016). Many of the artists felt that after they made the art, it no longer belonged to them but rather the community as a whole (Aryal, Paraajuli 2016). For the most part the artists do not care if it is destroyed or painted over, in fact they welcome it, it not only challenges them to keep creating but allows for the ownership of it by the community; “we don’t want them to treasure it, if another artist wants to come and paint over it, they can paint over it” (Maharjan, 2016).

Kiran, the artistic curator of ArtLab speaks of his collaboration with community members in terms of what that community might need when planning out a specific project. A main question for ArtLab when coming up with inspiration for their *Prasad* project, focused on migration and empowering youth through local Nepali heroes, is “who could be the potential heroes of that space” (Maharjan 2016). Meaning they target each piece towards the needs and cares of the specific community they are painting in. Kiran also recognizes that the artist must be thoughtful in their placement of the art; “street art is a form of urban intervention, we should focus on places that need this intervention” (Maharjan 2016). Sattya and Artudio also seem to be thoughtful of these aspects of placement and community need when choosing the locations for their work.

Another way in which the reach of the art is increased in the street art scene in Kathmandu is through community interaction and discussion on the internet and social media. This collaboration through social media has become an

incredibly important aspect of many of the interviewed artists' art. It allows for a larger and more open platform for discussion amongst anyone who wants to participate and expands the audience to the entire world. It also allows for the artist to clarify their intended message within the art and participate in discussions about that (Tamang, Maharjan 2016). Through these social media interactions, artists are also able to see work by other artists all over the world. They share new ideas, techniques, and mediums which was an important factor in bringing the street art scene to Nepal and continues to be important for its constant maintenance and growth in an ever-changing scene.

### **Discussion and Analysis:**

#### *Art, Activism, and its Intersection:*

The intersection of art and activism is complicated and views of it differ significantly amongst the artists interviewed. This is because art and activism often tend to have very different intentions and effects. For successful activism, crucial components often include: collaboration, a clear message and intention, a plan, a relatable message for viewers and audience, and as far as possible reach. However, for art, success is defined entirely differently and components for a successful piece of art differ based on a number of perspectives.

In general though, in the creation of art, individuality is important, as is that the art is coming from a personal place. Imagination within the viewer is also an important component. Other elements of art which seemed to be significant to

the artists interviewed included, people interpreting the art in their own way, even if it is not the way the artists intended, and creating something beautiful or aesthetically pleasing to the viewer—at least the viewer enjoys the piece aesthetically even if they may not get anything deeper out of it.

In the combination of art and activism, the aspects of success between the two are important yet sometimes contradict each other. Which makes the interlinking of the two complicated. One of the main ways found through this research to define success in this combination is honest intentions of the artist and a clear interpretation of those intentions by the viewers. Also crucial in art activism is a collaboration between artists, community, audience, ideas, materials, etc.; art that does not stand alone seems to be much more effective in terms of getting a message out. This is helpful when talking about controversial topics through art in Nepal such as issues in politics or religion. For example collaboration between ArtLab and Sattya—screening a film on the same topic wherever a mural is done for ArtLab’s Prasad project. Or another example, Aditya’s ‘rape me’ piece—perhaps it would have been better received had it not stood alone and instead had a collaboration of mediums accompanying it to better explain its intent and purpose. Discussions, workshops, and artist’s statements achieve this as well. In a piece of activist art, the message, content, and context should be clear and interpretation should not be difficult or abstract. While the support of abstract interpretation by many artists make sense in the abstract nature

of art itself, when the art is being used as a tool for specific change, this abstraction lessens the art's ability to achieve that change.

Art and Activism often come from very personal places and are often driven by personal experiences (Maharjan, Ranjit 2016). This is important as for an activist, as a personal experience may inspire one to act on an issue that they experience first hand. And for an artist, a personal experience may inspire a work of art as it seems that many artists make art only about things they can relate to (Aryal, Maharjan 2016). This is important for both artists and activists however it makes the combination of the two more complicated as work coming from the personal experience of an artist is not always relatable for the viewer—which is okay—art does not always have to be relatable but when it is used as an attempt to inspire, educate, or change, relatability is crucial to its ability to achieve these goals.

#### Success:

In general, it seems that art on a more personal or individual level is more abstract in intention and effect however when artists collaborate on a project through organizations such as Photo Kathmandu, Artudio, Artlab, Sattya, and Lasanaa, the intention and effect of the art or project seem much more clear and direct. These collaborations also seem to lead to more community focussed work rather than individual and in the end, a larger impact on the targeted audience as it becomes more relatable when not coming from such a personal place. People only

know what they have experienced—every interpretation of art comes from the viewers own experience within the context—a viewer can only see themselves in the work which makes it a very powerful medium but also complicated if the art is coming from a personal experience that the viewer cannot relate to.

However, there is still much validity in art coming from a personal place within an artist and art being made on an individual level is of course important as collaboration is often very difficult amongst artists with specific ideas. For this reason, defining success in art is impossible, however it seems that when there is a collaboration of ideas, people, or mediums the art becomes more relatable to a larger audience and thus more effective as a tool for activism or change; collaboration does a lot to expand the reach and possibilities of art, especially as a tool with activist intent. In addition to collaboration, having some sort of description, whether it be verbal (through discussion), visual (through film) or written (through an artist statement) offers a hint to the viewer what the art is meant to be about and can help with interpretation, thus aiding in the art's ability to act as a successful piece of activism.

This collaboration can come in many different forms; on the internet or social media, amongst artists, amongst the artist and their viewer or audience, amongst mediums, or amongst ideas. All of these forms of collaboration expand the reach of art standing alone and expand its potential to create change in a community.

Directions for further research:

To be able to properly gauge the effectiveness of art as a tool for activism and social change in Kathmandu, multiple directions could be taken. One direction which was an original intention of this research would be to speak to the viewers of this art—the targeted audience—to see if the intended messages are actually getting across, if the art has had an impact of their understanding of that specific issue, and if they have seen any changes in their community as a result of this art. Another direction to go with future research on this topic may be looking more directly at how this art has actually changed the society—what changes have been made in response to it? Or finally to look further into the foreign influence on the art scene in Kathmandu and how it has effected the community as a whole.

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## **List of Interviews:**

Kiran Maharjan. (Street Name: H11235). Artistic Currator for ArtLab. November 3, 2016. 2:00pm. ArtLab Studio in Kupondole, Lalitpur.

Amogh Paraajuli. Artist with ArtLab and current art student at KU School of Arts. November 7, 2016. 6:00pm. ArtLab Studio in Kupondole, Lalitpur.

Sazeena Nemkuo. Operations at Sattya Media Arts Collective. November 8, 2016. 12:00pm. Sattya Headquarters in Jawalkhel, Lalitpur.

Rupak Raj Sunuwr. (Street Name: Thuguchaaa). Artists with Sattya Media Arts Collective and art student at KU School of Arts. November 8, 2016. 1:00pm. Sattya Headquarters in Jawalkhel, Lalitpur.

Anish Bajracharya. Graphic Communication Professor at KU School of Arts and founding member of ArtLab (not wit ArtLab anymore). November 8, 2016. 6:00pm. Cafe De Patan, Patan.

Kunjan Tamang. Recent graduate of KU School of Arts, street artist (tagging). November 10, 2016. 12:00pm. Himalayan Beans, Jawalkhel.

David Samayoa. Employee of Operation Blessing (NGO) and beginning research of street art in Kathmandu. November 15, 2016. 5:00pm. Cafe Soma, Lalitpur.

Raji Manjari. Planning team member for Photo Kathmandu festival of Photo Circle. November 16, 2016. 1:00pm. Photo Circle, Patan.

Kiran Maharjan. Artistic Currator for ArtLab. November 17, 2016. 4:00pm. ArtLab Studio in Kupondole, Lalitpur.

Aditya Aryal. (Street Name: Sadhu-X). Kathmandu Street Artist and part ArtLab artist. November 20, 2016. Thamel.

Ashmina Ranjit. Artivist and founder of Lasanaa. November 21, 2016. 8:00pm. Nexus, Patan.

Ashmina Ranjit. Artivist and founder of Lasanaa. November 22, 2016. 9:00am. Nexus, Patan.

Kailesh Shrestha. Co-founder of Artudio. November 23, 2016. 12:00pm. Artudio Studio, Swayambhu.

Erina Tamrakar. Artist and co-founder of Arts Nepal. November 23, 2016.  
4:00pm. Kasthamandap Art Studio, Patan.